

# The Diary of Sarah Fishkin

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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## Abstract

The Diary of Sarah Fishkin follows the life of the Fishkin family as they fight to adapt and survive as the Nazis turn their city into a ghetto and their lives upside down. The family's faith and love endures, even as they face losing their homes, their possessions, and their lives. In the tough times that come, the play watches the bond between Sarah and her younger brother Jacob grow stronger and develop into the bond that would eventually bring Sarah's words to the world, even after her death.

## Acknowledgements

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# THE DIARY OF SARAH FISHKIN

## Cast of Characters:

Older Jacob – Our Adult Narrator

Sarah Fishkin – 17 Years Old

Jacob Fishkin – 14 Years Old

David Fishkin – The Children's Father

Shoshke Fishkin – The Children's Mother

Merre-Liebe – 9 Years Old

Yitzchak – 6 Years Old

Rivke-Henia – David's Mother, The children's *Bobie*

Zelda Gershon – Mid Thirties, Shoshke's Sister. A worker in a dental laboratory in Minsk.

Fireman

Two Jewish Ghetto Policemen

The time at Rise of Curtain: Late Summer 1941

The Place: Rubiezewicze, Poland

## ACT I

*(The stage is empty. A man - age is not important - enters through the audience. He moves slowly, observing the environment, taking stock, and evaluating. As he moves, the lights come up on the set, following what he has observed and possibly "created" for the audience. He is setting the stage for us, painting from his memories. Wordlessly, he creates the entire environment. We see before us a small village home. There is a kitchen/living area at stage left. Laundry in various stages of folding is draped across the table/chairs. He moves through the set picking up objects here and there, returning them to where he found them from, or perhaps placing them where he remembers them belonging. No one is present in the home, but we hear noises from outside as our Narrator remembers them. The sounds of cars/trucks and commands being shouted in German. It is late in the day, and fading sunlight streams through the windows - perhaps he remembers the lighting is too bright and "adjusts" it to where it ought to be. We can also see one small bedroom with two small beds in it stage right. There are other rooms beyond that we do not see. Finally, everything is as it should be and our Narrator places himself somewhere out of the way to watch. At some point during the action of the scene, he may - without drawing the audience's attention - slip from the setting as the memories take no longer require his "creation."*

*The door opens and a young woman enters. She, too, knows this place, it is her home. Unlike the man who standing in the corner, she exists in 1941. She is not aware of the man's presence; he does not exist to her or anyone else in the scene. Something is bothering her, something she witnessed in the village. She enters the bedroom, sitting on the bed closest to the window that looks onto the street beside the house. She opens a drawer in a bedside table and takes out a bound leather journal, pencil attached. She opens the journal, gathers her thoughts, and begins to write.)*

*As Sarah, writes, the door to the house opens again and a young man of 14 (Jacob) enters.*

JACOB

Sarah! Sarah! Wait!

*(He looks into the first room before continuing on, calling out as he goes.)*

Sarah! Why wouldn't you wait for me? Mother was worried-

SARAH

I have to write this down.

*(Jacob begins to speak as we hear a call from outside.)*

DAVID

Yakov! Come out here and bring in this flour. You left it out here and we can't afford to lose it.

*(Jacob hesitates, watching his sister.)*

Now, Jacob.

*(Jacob leaves as **David** enters. He is a strong-looking man. He wears a worn page boy cap that he removes so that he can wipe his brow as he looks around the first room. Seeing the laundry, he moves some of it aside to clear chairs, one for his mother, and one for his wife. He briefly exits and reappears in the room where Sarah is writing.)*

Sarah. Come help your brother.

SARAH

Not just yet, Papa. I have to write this all down so I won't forget anything.

DAVID

*(A pause as he considers his daughter, then nods.)*

Be quick about it.

*(He returns to the first room just as **Shoshke** enters, accompanied by Jacob and his two younger siblings, **Merre-Liebe** and **Yitzchak**. Merre-Liebe is quiet as she holds Yitzchak's hand)*

SHOSHKE

That they would make us share the little space they've granted us...

YITZCHAK

Mama, I'm tired.....

SHOSHKE

Shhh.... David...

DAVID

It will be alright...

*(He helps his mother to one of the chairs he has cleared.)*

At least we haven't been ordered to leave.... This "ghetto" is coming to us; we have our village, and our home. We can remain here. The conditions will be an adjustment, yes, but this isn't the first time we've faced hard times. Is it, Bobie?

BOBIE

Tck.

*(She waves him away.)*

DAVID

You see? Bobie is not concerned.

*(He approaches his wife, kissing her on the forehead.)*

We will figure something out. But for now we are with our people; we are together, and we are home.

*(Shoshka shakes her head, and smiles at her husband before crossing to the laundry. There is a knock on the door. The family is confused; they are not expecting visitors. Jacob moves for the door, but David stops him.)*

Jacob. No.

*(David moves for the door, and peers out the small peep hole.)  
(Surprised, to Shoshke.)*

It's Zelda! Your Sister!

JACOB

Who?

SHOSHKA

*(In disbelief.)*

Zelda...

JACOB

Who?

*(David quickly and eagerly opens the door. There stands **Zelda**. She is in her early to mid thirties, blonde with a dynamic personality. She is from Minsk and was stranded there when the border between Russia and Poland was established some 25 years ago. The family stands in silence.)*

SHOSHKA

*(In tears.)*

Zelda, my dear sister!

*(They embrace.)*

ZELDA

Shoshka!

JACOB

*(Frustrated, he has never met Zelda.)*

WHO?

ZELDA

*(Laughing.)*

And who is this?

SHOSHKE

*(With an arm around her sister.)*

This is our third eldest, Jacob.

ZELDA

And David I know.

DAVID

Hello, Zelda.

*(They hug.)*

SHOSHKA

How did you get here? It's been so long; not so much as a letter since the Soviet border went up.

ZELDA

I hitchhiked. I didn't have much trouble; everyone assumed I was a Gentile Russian. I had a hard time avoiding the German guards here, though. What is that wall they are building?

SHOSHKA

*(Gravely.)*

They are turning us into what they are calling a Ghetto. Shipping Jews from across the countryside here sometime in the coming months.

DAVID

*(Joking.)*

Our Shoshka is worried she might have to cook for more people now.

SHOSHKA

*(Giving him a reproachful look.)*

That's not funny David.

ZELDA

*(Chiding her sister.)*

Still so serious, sister? I can almost see you leading Bund meetings back home.

DAVID

Come. Sit, sit.

*(They gather at the table, Sarah appears at the doorway to the room, she heard her aunt's arrival.)*

Sarah, prepare some tea for your Aunt.



*(The **family** moves in silence, there is a shift in the lights to suggest the passage of time. It is now late at night. The older members of the family now sit around a table. **Bobie** is asleep in the visible bedroom, and the **two youngest children** are asleep on a couch in the living room. Sarah sits with her diary open in front of her, writing.)*

SHOSHKA

Tell us what is happening in Minsk.

ZELDA

The conditions in Minsk are not much better than they are here, I'm afraid. There, too, they are creating what they call a ghetto for the Jews. It was sheer horror for us all. You may have heard about it. They made us register with the local German authorities and started forcibly relocating families into the Jewish quarter. Some of the young men and women escaped to the woods. We became aware of what to expect from the Germans. The Partisan movement did not want us, unless we could bring weapons and ammunition with us. So we said, "Fine, we'll do our best on our own."

DAVID

Us?

ZELDA

An underground movement in cooperation with some members of the Judenrat. It's a little complicated. Not only do we have enemies among the non-Jews, but we've had to suspect Jews, too, believe it or not. The Germans became suspicious, and executed two members of the Judenrat.

SHOSHKA

Who?

ZELDA

Binyamin Roth and Eli Fedner

*(**Shoshka** gives a shocked gasp; she knew one of the men very well.)*

That's why I'm here.

*(**Zelda** removes from gold coins hidden in her clothing.)*

I've come to procure arms. The only way we can get them is by paying for them in gold. I volunteered for this mission, because this might be the only chance I get to see you. I don't know if I'll ever see you again. As for the partisan movement, they were not anxious to accept us. We had an unfortunate experience with them. They seized arms from our boys and even shot some of them. As a whole, the civilian population is being very hostile.

SARAH

*(Moves to the table.)*

But why wouldn't they accept you?

ZELDA

A delegation of prominent Jews in Minsk, some of high military rank arranged a meeting with a high command of the Partisan movement in the Minsk region. It was a painstaking task, but it had to be done, and we did it. I'll just tell you what was said, and that, I hope, will answer your question. Suppose a family of five Jews hides in the woods. At night the father knocks at a door, brandishing a gun and demanding food for his family. The peasant understandably resents the intruders. The Germans call these Jews bandits and robbers, and the peasants agree. So the Germans encounter no peasant resistance to their anti-Semitic activities. The Partisan commander in the Minsk Region said, "When we need help from the population, we issue orders from a command post and carefully plan things so as not to offend the civilian population in any way. We give civilians a receipt for the value of whatever they contribute and we promise them that after the war they will be repaid by the USSR government – with interest. Among your people, however there is no discipline." To be brief, whether his claim is true or not, the fact remains: the Partisan movement is not happy with us. They might be empathetic, but that's all. The truth is that the Germans mean to kill us all. The local population couldn't care less; they even help the Germans. The Partisans don't want us, although they'll tolerate a group of families around their compounds, staying some kilometers away, to serve as a warning for when the Germans attack.

SHOSHKA

How can we save ourselves? It seems there is no hope.

ZELDA

The plan you suggested of hiding your family among the peasants is a good one, especially if you know the peasants well. As for shattered hopes, Shoshka – I wouldn't lose hope so soon. I would delay that judgment until the storm is over. You'll have to hide when danger is imminent, and then reappear when things settle down. That's why we have to build hiding places in the ghetto and in the woods, the way animals do. It's our only hope! Since Jacob knows the survival secrets of animals in the woods, he'll be able to offer help.

*(She smiles at him.)*

Invaluable help.

*(Turning to Sarah.)*

As for you, Sarah, what you are writing in your diary is of great importance. If you could offer your services to the Partisans, it would help a great deal. I'll report my experiences with you to my committee in Minsk. Your high spirits give me the courage to carry on.

DAVID

As I see it, you've had a hard time of it in Minsk. Why don't all of you come to us and we'll find room for you in our house? At least we'll be together again. It's been far too long. I'm sure Shoshka wouldn't mind cooking for family.

*(Teasing her again.)*

ZELDA

*(Smiling.)*

I'll discuss it with our sisters.

*(Silence. Then Zelda continues, her stoic mask cracking.)*

I don't know where it would be safer. There is no haven for us. We are hunted like animals.

*(She stops, wipes away tears and regains her stoic tone after glancing at her watch.)*

I must meet my friends in the vicinity of Koydanov at a given time. I need a few hours of rest first. I have to rise very early.

DAVID

Why don't we go with you to Koydanov?

ZELDA

... That would be nice.

DAVID

It's settled then.

*(The family rises to action.)*

SARAH

I'll prepare baskets of food.

SHOSHKE

Zelda, take some clothing back with you.

ZELDA

I couldn't possibly carry them with me.

SHOSKE

Nonsense. We'll just have to pack well.

DAVID

And I'll heat up water so you can relax with a bath.

ZELDA

I really appreciate that.

SHOSKE

Children! Off to bed; we're waking early in the morning.

*(The lights fade and as **Sarah** speaks, she returns to sit on her bed, sits and begins to write. The light focus solely on her.)*

SARAH

Aunt Zelda, from Minsk. A long time has passed. Two decades have been counted. Poor mother, at times, with tear-filled eyes, would mention how long periods of time go by without providing an opportunity to see one's own children. While she speaks of Yentle, I know she thinks of her two sisters left in Minsk. This is a time when the roads that should tie mutual blood together are blocked by tall, over-grown grasses, when moments of one's childhood must be forgotten and the city where one was

born becomes the place where one must later suffer and survive many trying hardships. One must forget entirely about times past, about many familiar paths in young forests, about all that was beloved and precious. All must be encompassed slowly in clear thoughts, and then forgotten or face wasting away, living in memory.

Yes, it is sad to imagine experiencing such a parting while one is still young. But man overcomes everything, becomes indifferent to anything, and thinks that things should be as they are and not otherwise. And today, when the early morning was cold and frosty, when the pavement stones were wet from passing rain, when fleeting thoughts were reflected upon, when I did not have to go to work near the bridge in a quiet moment I perceived the unexpected sound of a single question: "How are you?" Then the warm exchange of kisses between a mother, brother and sister.

It cuts at my heart to realize that for such a long time there was no meeting, and now, in these bad times, we see each other. On the one hand, the fact that the reunion exists is wonderful. On the other hand, there is sadness because we are in such a grave situation. A wave of misfortune and calamity is engulfing the Jewish population. The heart is petrified upon hearing of the repeated scenes of heavy tragedy, or when one sees with one's own eyes the felling of young, flourishing trees, when thousands of innocent souls are hurried directly to Heaven. So many are cut down who yearned to live and build and create! Yes! Forgotten lovely experiences are now repeatedly recalled, moments that looked to the future, to beautiful days ahead, moments when extravagant but not unrealistic aspirations were visualized, when everything was attractive and we were filled with pride and endurance. We looked the rapidly approaching future directly in the eye. Everything was enveloped in a rosy glow like that cast by a projector. Our feelings were entirely pure. There was much to be proud of, but the threads which bound the present day to the coming ones were too weak. They were cut off, leaving in our hands only the short ends.

Perhaps they had not disappeared for long: courage and hope must not be lost, the cut threads tell us. There will yet come a time when the thoughts secreted within each sufferer will be seen openly, and everything will be revealed. Bygone dreams will pass before our eyes: earlier plans and dreams of achievement will be reawakened in all their beauty, joy and vitality. But the footfall of the bloody past will echo continuously, and cause concern in the future over days lived through now.

*(As Sarah finishes, the house again rustles with activity. It is morning and the family members are rising and preparing to accompany Zelda.)*

JACOB

Aunt Zelda? Will you take me to Minsk? I hear it's a big city with tall buildings, and automobiles, and electricity... and water that comes from the walls... toilets inside houses! And the schools! I've never been to such a city! Father took me to Wolozin and I didn't give him any trouble. Did I, father?

*(He turns to Sarah.)*

I came with Father to get you, didn't I?

*(He turns his pleas back to Zelda.)*

Take me with you, Aunt Zelda!

BOBIE

Don't bother her. You and your crazy ideas. You think Minsk is next door? It's just as far away as Wolozin, maybe further. You could hardly walk when you fell into the house, returning from Wolozin...

JACOB

But I'm all right now, Bobie!

### ZELDA

Listen, Jacob. One day I'll not only take you with me, but your entire family as well. When that time comes, I'll arrive with a car and show you the beautiful city of Minsk. I'll explain how electricity works, how water comes from a faucet, and, especially, I'll show you the many schools. Right now, though, all of these nice things are forbidden to Jews. There are no schools for Jewish children. But this will not last forever. The day will come when schools will be open to us, too. Just be patient.

*(Zelda looks at what Shoshka has prepared for her and shakes her head.)*

I'm sorry, Shoshka – I can't take all these things you prepared for me. If I'm forced to run, I'll have to drop them.... Let's go. It's getting late... To tell the truth, it's not necessary for all of you to accompany me. Your father alone would have been fine.

*(A pause.)*

Now comes the hardest moment for me – saying goodbye to you all, to my sister and her husband, to Sarah and to Jacob. We've all cried a lot already; let's not cry anymore.

*(The family enters into a tearful embrace as the lights fade.)*

### NARRATOR

The occupying power gave us no rest. There was constant talk of creating a ghetto. I did not know what "ghetto" meant; it was a new word for my family and myself. The local Jewish Police (who did not like what they were obliged to do) knocked at our door frequently, and Sarah and I were sent off to do all kinds of work. They often came for Father, too, but he was away working in the nearby villages. When that happened, the police conscripted me instead.

On one occasion, Sarah was assigned to work in the Sula marshes. She was ill and unable to go, so I went in her place. A German base was located near the place where we were put to work, and the German occupants decided to amuse themselves with us. As we stood working knee-deep in the marsh, the Germans appeared and began to beat us mercilessly. I, too, took some of the blows, though I tried desperately to avoid them.

The workers panicked. They screamed, falling in to the mud. Despite their pain and their bleeding wounds, they began running in all directions. The Germans tried to round us up with their whips, but I managed to keep running until I finally reached the forest. Exhausted, I fell, the screams of the wounded still ringing in my ears. I was afraid to cry lest I attract attention. I dozed off. When I opened my eyes, I was alone. The woods were frighteningly quiet. I stood, and, despite the pain, ran home as fast as I could.

*(He leaves, watching the scene as Sarah is sitting on her bed, writing. She is in bed, ill. The only one in the house.)*

### SARAH

Great changes become evident as I turn the diary pages recording events experienced about two years ago. The only conclusion one can draw, considering both past and present, individual life and the community as a whole, is this: ever and always, man suffers. He constantly finds himself inside an encircling chain of oppressive, inexplicable matters. He has two kinds of thoughts: imagination, and plans concerning actual procedures in life. This leaves him always in a state of uncertainty. Why are things so, and not otherwise? He asks himself. But these characteristics of thought belong to the past. Analyzing the

present state of thought among people yields quite a different attitude, especially with respect to the future, achievement and career. Things are so hard right now; you can't waste time thinking of "what ifs" unless it's planning the next step for survival. Your mind closes the shutters on the windows that open to beautiful things. One goal is dominant: to maintain life.

When this is over, I'm sure those windows will be reopened and my dreams will become familiar and desirable again. In today's life there is one road, and on it two pictures keep alternating before my eyes: death... life... for the moment I seem dead, but then the thought comes that I am still alive.

Another season of cold is coming on to replace the lovely warm summer days which served as some salve to ease our suffering. The fields and gardens were filled with good things, and one could be outdoors and sleep under the clear starlit sky. And now that, too, is gone and the warmth has disappeared along with the good days. People are getting hungry as the increased restrictions make food hard to come by. Our neighbors are becoming more and more anxious. At times, however, you hope, and lend courage to others.

Thinking about Rosh Hashanah brings sad thoughts, none of which bolster us for life. Last year I was among strangers, away from my family, but I was free. I was not a slave to this German Pharaoh. With the passing of a year my situation has worsened. Nevertheless, G-d be thanked, people in our town really should not complain. And on this Rosh Hashanah, when all the inhabitants of the town are gathered in the synagogue, they remember the towns that were burnt down and the synagogues which – if they did remain standing – are empty. Today everyone is shedding rivers of tears on account of the destruction, the unbridled persecution, and the terrifying times. Everyone's hearts, as a result are shattered by the thought of what can become of people with the passage of a short period of time; poor, homeless, hungry, and lonely, separated from their children who were killed by bombs. And right now they are all praying to G-d; their cries resound as they plead with Him to improve the condition of the Jews in the new year, so that there will not be any more new graves. Enough innocent people have fallen. Grant us a good year, a joyful year. And may the passing of the old year take with it the trials of the present....

*(The front door opens and Jacob enters. He is bedraggled and exhausted, but running on a sort of inner strength. Sarah hears this and goes to see who it is. She sees Jacob, smiles, and runs to hug him. He recoils and she responds.)*

SARAH

Please tell me what happened in Sula. Everyone who went came back beaten and bloody. Some could scarcely walk. How is it that you're all right, and hardly even scratched?

*(Jacob lifts up the back of his shirt and displays black and blue welts to Sarah. She shakes her head sadly.)*

I'm glad Mother didn't see those people, all of them so badly beaten. I don't know if she could handle worrying about whether or not you'd come home.

JACOB

Then don't tell her about them. She doesn't have to know everything. And I'm glad you were unable to go to work this morning. I can imagine Mother if she saw you coming home from Sula beaten and bloody. We all need to learn to run really fast. You would have had a badly wounded brother if I hadn't been able to run well today. Where are they?

SARAH

They left to try to buy more food. Father is off in --

JACOB

-- What are you writing?

SARAH

A Diary.

JACOB

Can I read it?!

SARAH

*(Protectively.)*

No. It's very personal, and no one else is allowed to read it. Not even my little brother. I have to write. If I don't express what I feel, I'll explode... And please don't disturb me when I'm writing. It hurts me to have to push you out of my room. I don't like to do it.

*(Pause.)*

Here, I'll give you an idea of the kind of things I write. Today I am going to jot down everything I saw. It's not terribly interesting, but I have to tell someone. I have no 'someone' in whom I can confide. Can I tell Masha? Would she be interested? No. She's seeing it all, too. Our people are seeing and experiencing it all themselves, and are not interesting in listening to me. Sometimes I feel like screaming. Why the beatings? Why so much bloodshed? But if I scream, everyone will think I'm crazy. Can you understand that? When I write, what I am really doing is silently screaming, silently bleeding. I am in pain. But you see nothing of all that. That's why it's so private. To you they're just words, but they're words that pour out of me in my distress. When you bother me, I can't write candidly. You showed me the black and blue marks from the lashes you received today. Of course you were in pain, but at least you could scream and you would be understood. I cannot scream the way you did.

*(She lifts up a sleeve.)*

Do you see any black and blue marks? Any bruises on me? There aren't any. Do you see any blood on me? No, of course you don't... But inside, I am bleeding. I'm black and blue inside, from the end of every strand of hair down to the tips of my toes. Some day you will understand. Yes, I am certain that you will. I think you're a very bright boy. You do clever things. During that encounter with the Partisans, it was your reaction that saved Father's life when those people suspected him of being a spy. And how you got the flour! I would never have thought of doing what you did. Or take the way you gave mother the idea of opening a school, even though you were unaware of what you were doing. And now, today, your successful escape from danger.

JACOB

You don't have to be bright for that sort of thing. It just happened. I did it without thinking.

SARAH

*(Her mind on something else.)*

Have you forgotten what happened a few years ago? I was so angry; I was ready to kill you. You made

me cry and I began to hit you.

JACOB

What?

*(Laughing.)*

What happened a few years ago?

SARAH

Father had a few extra coins that he wanted us to share, but there was not really enough for both of us. So the question arose: who should get the money, you or I? We all agreed that I should be the one. Even you said so. Now do you remember what happened? You got the money! And do you know why? Because you said that if Father gave it to me I would spend it, but that if you got it, you would double its value and then give it back to me. I was so angry, but you were right. Do you remember how you did it? You decided to make kvas. You made it at home, and then sold it for double the money.

JACOB

That was so long ago! I had completely forgotten.

SARAH

It wasn't that long ago. Two or three years, maybe. No more than that.

JACOB

I couldn't have done it without you. It was a lot of fun because you helped me.

SARAH

*(Grinning.)*

Everything went well until we poured the kvas into the bottles and corked them. Then, in the middle of the night, all hell broke loose. The bottles began to pop their corks. The noise woke the whole family, and everyone ran down to the cellar to see what was happening.

JACOB

When we got down there, the corks were still popping and the kvas was pouring out of the bottles.

SARAH

We ran to pick up the corks and quickly stuffed them back into the bottles. Bobie thought a war had started in the cellar!

JACOB

You're straying from the subject. Why do you keep chasing me out of your room?

SARAH



I told you why. We'll talk more about it some other time. We're discussing the kvas now.

JACOB

*(Pause.)*

Okay. So what about the Kvas?

SARAH

You were so determined to do it again, it was fun watching you. Nothing stopped you. You had to get the stale rye bread from the baker, the ice from the butcher, the sugar from the grocer and, of course you had to pay for everything with your labor.

JACOB

Do you remember the trouble we had getting the yeast from the Rabbi's wife? She became suspicious, "Your mother doesn't bake challah in the middle of the week. Why do you need yeast today? And who's going to pay for it? Something smells fishy here!"

SARAH

We finally had to bring Mother into the mess, to get the rebbetzin to agree to sell us the yeast.

JACOB

You're trying to butter me up, Sarah, to keep me from sneaking into your room.

SARAH

No I'm not. I already know you've been doing it.

*(Back to the Kvas.)*

Do you remember all the money we made? The farmers were glad to get the kvas, and to pay for it.

JACOB

It was a delicious drink. Cold and bubbly, and on the sour side.

SARAH

You paid me back many times over, and I love you dearly, but run along, Jacob. Mother is worried for you. I'll be right behind you.

*(Sarah writes as the lights change and focus solely on the narrator so the set can be changed.)*

NARRATOR

In late 1942 we began to hear strange words over and over again: Judenrat, Shkita, Ghetto, Ubersiedlung, Schutsaffel, SS, Einsatztruppen, Ukrayiner, Litviner... At home in Rubiezewicze, it did not take very long to find out what was taking place, and what all those words meant. Some Jews arrived from Koydanov and told us what had happened in their town. It was a horrific story – an unbelievable one.

Our entire community was shocked by what we heard. Shut up in her room, Sarah wrote without stopping. We all worried about her; Mother begged her to eat. Sarah became obsessed with hiding her diary. Where should she hide it? At the time, no one had an answer for her.

*(The lights change. The adults of the family are now sitting around the dining table again to candlelight the lights rise on a conversation already in progress.)*

SARAH

... The entire community of Koydanov was rounded up and marched to a pit and then shot. One by one. Except for the few who managed to run away, but everyone, men, women, children, young and old.... All murdered...

*(She begins to rifle through her journal, scratching away notes, looking at what she had written.)*

I've been talking to the survivors... The one staying with the Grossmans said that –

DAVID

Sarah. That's enough.

SARAH

No it isn't! I have to write down what I hear. This has to be recorded so *someone* can find it. I must hide my diary. But where?

*(The family sits in uneasy silence. No one has an answer.)*

DAVID

We must be careful, especially if we leave. The Litviner and Ukraiynier are returning escaped Jews to the Germans. They set up Food Distribution sites and promise Jews food and a "good future" if they sign up for work. Those who do are immediately rounded up and handed over to the Germans. Some peasants are willing to help, but many would rather turn us over to the Germans for sugar, salt, and kerosene.

SARAH

They will kill us, too. There is no escape; I must write. The world must be told what is happening here. The diary must not be destroyed...

SHOSHKE

Sarah, please.

*(Shoshke and David leave. Sarah sits to write.)*

SARAH

Monday, December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1941

Today we became a ghetto. The morning was clear and warm for December. The night had passed

quickly. The sun came up in the east with a rosy light and began to scatter about its rays with its scarcely noticeable frost. The inhabitants of the city woke with sad smiles on their lips and looked out of their lightly iced windows covered with jeweled frost-flowers. The horizon seems close and low as I stand in the valley beside the half-frozen river. The stream mirrors my figure as I stand there. I feel that my former vision for the distant, unclear future has greatly deteriorated, and my fate, which is clothed in thick layers of sadness and depression, has taken a turn for the worse. The environment is empathetic; the roads are covered with snow, and even the little birds seem sad and melancholy as they flit down and seemingly seek to comfort those who do not know what suffering awaits them. Everything here weeps and cries out to G-d to withdraw the frightful edict which is in force. Everywhere, tears seem to be flowing. Rivers of hot, searing tears which tear apart even the healthy, vibrant heart.

It was dark last night; only a few stars broke through the blackness. Everyone was quietly asleep, dreaming dreams of the freedom to come. It was during those nocturnal hours that knocking could be heard, rousing the people. Then came the shouts directing the Jews to leave their homes and move over to the Ghetto, "where they belong." Night fell quickly. From a distance, long lines of Jews could be seen approaching from Naliboki, Dekheyno, Kamieniec, Walcz, Rotovo... Everyone sighed wearily. All our hearts grieved at the thought that at such a cold, dark hour people were being taken from their own homes. A miserable fate. Little children cried. Bundles were tossed down and curious onlookers chased from the street. In the space of a few hours, everything grew quiet. Now everyone is under the roof of some dwelling.

*(The lights change, it is a different day. Sarah is now sitting on one of the chairs downstage, flipping forlornly through the diary as Jacob approaches.)*

SARAH

Who can tell where these cruel winds of fate will scatter my beloved diary, and where the pages will lie strewn about?

*(She pauses a moment, considering.)*

... Let's bury it.

JACOB

Where? In the Cellar? In the ground?

SARAH

No, I guess not. It would rot.... In bottles, perhaps?

JACOB

I don't understand why you should want to bury the diary. You've always kept it in your room. If you catch me touching it or turning a page, you get furious and shove me out of your room. You never fail to get me.

*(As an afterthought.)*

For a girl you're pretty strong.

SARAH

Why do I want to bury it? If you don't see why, you really are stupid. Don't you understand that even if

they kill us, I still want the world to know how it all happened?

JACOB

Hey! If you want the world to know, please remember that I am also a part of the world, and that I want to know what the devil you're writing! Why do you chase me out and fight with me about it? If I know what's in the diary, and I survive, I'll be able to tell others what you wrote. Isn't that true? Then, why don't you let me read it? Why all the mystery? Why are you ready to kill your younger brother over that diary? I won't swallow the words just by reading them! After I read it, I'll help you bury it.

SARAH

*(Brushing him off.)*

Just think of something.

JACOB

I have an idea. But I won't tell you until you promise to let me read the diary.

SARAH

*(Considering him for a moment.)*

Alright, then. I'll make a deal with you. You may read only what I give you, and never go into my room unless I call you. How's that?

JACOB

It's not very good, but it's better than being thrown out, kicked, and cursed.

SARAH

*(Smiles and hugs him.)*

Hey, Come on. It's nice to have a little brother to fight with once in a while. You know I love you.

JACOB

I'm not so sure.

SARAH

*(Teasing.)*

I can't fight with Merre-Liebe and Yitzhak; they're too small. Besides, Yitzhak is always crying and Merre-Liebe isn't well; her eyes are swollen all the time.

JACOB

Come on.... Let me see what you're writing.

*(Sarah lovingly lifts the diary, and flips through the pages. She finds the intended page, and pulls Jacob close to her, putting an arm around him.)*

*(Impatiently.)*

What are you waiting for? I can read it for myself.

SARAH

*(Shaking her head. She is very serious. She points to the page and begins to read aloud.)*

February 6, 1941. I think of the distant battlefields where our best people are courageously fighting the Germans. They fight and fall, and over their dead bodies a multi-headed mass marches into battle against these injustices.

JACOB

Isn't the battle right here, in the Ghetto, in Rubiezewicze? Please talk to Hershel, isn't he a resistance fighter? I want to know what it means to be a fighter. I'll bet he's a true war hero.

SARAH

Yes. He's already talked with us, in a covert way, so as not to arouse the suspicions of the police. He told us about the woods, about derailing trains, killing Germans, taking their guns and then disappearing. He would always sing that song: "Never say you're walking the last road." I remember that we didn't pay him too much attention. He was always a bit nervous.

JACOB

We've got to look for him! He must still be in the ghetto. Or he could be somewhere near Father's workplace. We'll ask around tomorrow when we go to meet father and help him carry home what he's earned this week. It would be really great if we ran into the Partisans along the way...

SARAH

*(Smiling.)*

It would be nice if we could sneak out of the ghetto early so we could look around in the forest.

JACOB

*(Jumping up.)*

Just imagine! We wouldn't have to worry about the police, about work, or anything. Let's get up early, so we can do it. And as for hiding your diary, let's discuss it with Father and hear what he suggests.

SARAH

*(Closing the diary.)*

You have a deal. I can hardly wait. It's getting dark now, and I can't read or write anymore. So I'll take Merre-Liebe and you take Yitzchak, and let's get them into bed.

*(They gather up their siblings and take them off to bed as the Narrator reenters.)*

NARRATOR

Sarah and I left early the next morning to meet Father in Shimkowitz. We could hardly wait to see

Father's happy face when he caught sight of us. His embrace was a gift from heaven. He always choked up when he hugged us, smiling and crying at the same time. I asked Sarah how he could do that. "It's a mixture of pain, sorrow, and happiness," she explained, "our father is a wonderful man – the best of fathers. He loves us so much, it hurts him." When we finally returned home late in the evening, Mother was positioned at her lookout point. Father would whistle and she would whistle back; by this time, she was very good at it.

*(As Jacob describes the following scene, we see it acted out. Jacob, Sarah, David, and Shoshke enter the home to be greeted by the two youngest members of the household followed by Bobie.)*

Mother was all smiles as we entered the house. So was my grandmother. When Bobie smiled, everyone else had to smile, too. The two little ones looked at the good things we'd brought and found that they, too, had something to smile about.

*(It is a joyous moment for the family. The Narrator watches, smiling, as the younger Jacob pulls his mother aside to speak with her.)*

JACOB

Mother. I have to tell you something. I have to get it off my chest.

SHOSHKE

*(Smiles, and follows.)*

What is it, my Yankel?

JACOB

Do you know why we got up so early this Friday morning?

SHOSHKE

Why?

JACOB

Well... We wanted to decide on a place to hide the diary. We were also hoping to establish contact with the partisans, to see if we could join them. Instead, Father and Sarah talked about some strange things. They spoke about something called a "Bund" and paid no attention to anything I said.

SHOSHKE

Ah. What else did they talk about?

JACOB

Father recalled the way you once recited a poem in Minsk, and told us that you were from a village called Cusda, near Kharkov. Then they spoke about some Rabbi. Sarah wanted to show Father how beautiful it was outside, and how ugly inside the ghetto. Father was wiping away tears, he was very emotional. I didn't understand what it was all about. It was all so boring.

*(He begins to walk away and remembers.)*

And then Father talked about waiting to shake your hand, and how he couldn't get near you after you read

the poem. That made me laugh. And Sarah said he certainly did get near you – he married you! IT was so stupid. We sat there for a long time while they talked nonsense. Sarah wanted to know who Sonietzke was. I told her that it was you, but she ignored me. Everyone does that to me – except the little ones. They're always on my side.

SARAH

*(Leans over Jacob's shoulder.)*

Don't you want to know who your mother is?

JACOB

Everybody knows Mother! All the Koydanovers do. They all come here, to our house. Ask anyone from Rubiezewicze who Shoshke is. They'll tell you. Even the beggars know her; she always gives them something. All the world knows Shoshke.

SARAH

Father started to tell us about our mother, but you were half asleep and bored. You weren't the least bit interested. You even seemed to be laughing at us.

*(Teasing.)*

No one ignores you, Yakov. You should understand that. When you are a little older, you will also want to know who your Mother – the "real" person – is. Father wanted us to really know her, so he began to tell us. But you fell asleep. Now if you'll behave, we'll ask Mother to continue where Father left off.

SHOSHKE

What's this all about? What do you want me to continue?

*(Teasing David who is upstage with his youngest children.)*

What have you started?

DAVID

Sonietshka, you know Sarah – always dreaming. We were standing just outside Shimkowitz Forest, admiring the sunset and how beautiful the Shtetl looked from there. When Sarah suddenly began reciting one of your poems, "Oh Take Not," I felt a chill. Suddenly, I saw you in my mind's eye as you were when I first met you. It was like a dream. A quarter of a century has passed since you made your entrance at the Bund meetings in Minsk, yet I remember it so vividly. I fell in love with you then, and I still love you dearly... So now, Sonia. Continue where I left off.

SHOSHKE

*(Smiling.)*

I remember all of it. And you, Yakov, had better listen.

BOBIE

Sounds interesting already.

SARAH

You were a seamstress and the leader of the Bund movement in Kharkov. Father heard you speak and recite one of your poems at the Bund meeting in Minsk. A young man heckled you, but you handled it with grace and poise, impressing everyone, of course. They rushed up to congratulate you, but Father couldn't make it through the crowds to get to you. Now please tell us what happened after the meeting

DAVID

It's your turn, Sonietshka.

SHOSHKE

Oh my goodness. Let me think a moment. Ah, yes. After that assignment, I had to return to Kharkov. I visited my family in Cusda. I hadn't seen them for a while, so I enjoyed my time with them. As I journeyed to Kharkov, I was bothered by the questions that young man had asked at the meeting, and by our ensuing dialogue. To some extent, I agreed with his position. I tried to find answers. The upper echelons in the new Soviet government were becoming suspicious of the Bund movement. They made things difficult for us in all kinds of ways. The NKVD questioned some of our leaders and even threatened to arrest them. They cited various reasons for our dissolution, and told us that we should espouse the doctrine of the official government party. Soon there were splits in our ranks. I did not like this and made several attempts to remedy the situation but I was unsuccessful. When some of our leaders were arrested in Kharkov, Leningrad and other cities, I knew I would have to find a solution. I decided to abandon all Bund activities for a while and wait to see what happened next. I went home, to Cusda. A short time later the Bund publications were confiscated and more arrests made. I was glad I was not in Kharkov. In the meantime, Lenin had assumed firm control of the communist party. When we learned that the government planned to establish a permanent border between Poland and Russia, we decided to move. Cusda was very close to the proposed border, and would apparently remain part of Russia. I welcomed my mother's decision to move to the Polish side, although we had different reasons for going there. My mother felt that the communist party was part of a godless movement and she wanted nothing to do with anything so perverse. My own reason was to save the Bund and its leaders who were seeking ways to get out of Russia. Through various contacts we learned what was happening in Russia, and we braced ourselves for the worst. We crossed the border without incident and made our way into the Polish town of Rubiezewicze, the transport point on the Polish side. There was a substantial local Jewish population and we immediately made our way to the local shul. At the time, we were the only family in the synagogue: four beautiful sisters, three handsome brothers, and a tall, distinguished-looking mother in her middle forties, ready to start a new life.

I imagined myself and my own family, starting over in a strange place. Mother made it sound exciting, and maybe it had been. But I thought I would be more fun to join the Partisans. Mother knew a man in Rubiezewicze, whom she described to us. His name was Reb Gershon. He had stopped at our house in Cusda on his way to Minsk. I was often away, busy with political activities, but my brothers and sisters knew Reb Gershon well. He would tell them all sorts of stories and was always welcome in our home. He had a good sense of humor, a ready smile, and was a shrewd businessman. He dealt in leather and manufactured shoes. As soon as Reb Gershon heard that there were new arrivals at the synagogue, he came running. Without any hesitation, he said, "you will stay with us. Get ready. In the meantime I'll go home and tell my wife to prepare for you."

When he returned, he introduced me to a dashing young man. "This is my son, David." David walked right over to me and said, "Sonietshka, I heard your poem and Bund meeting. I tried to approach you to offer my congratulations, but my effort was not successful. I left for home disappointed and heartbroken I never thought I'd meet you again, but here you are! I have come here to welcome you all to



our home.”

*(Shoshke stops; there are tears in hers and David's eyes. The family is engrossed in the tale, even Rivke-Henia, who is smiling.)*

And now, you know something about your mother.

SARAH

*(Breathlessly.)*

What happened next?

JACOB

What a stupid question! I'll tell you what happened. Shoshke and David fell in love, married, and raised a family. That's what happened.

*(Sarah gently and playfully covers Jacob's mouth.)*

SHOSHKE

Yes, we did fall in love.

*(With a look to David.)*

Father was, and IS a great man, and a loving one. It was exciting to be with him. He was a Zionist; I was a Bundist – two different ideologies, two totally diverse approaches toward achieving the same goal. Although he hadn't liked the man who questioned me at the meeting, he identified with him. With patience, tolerance, fairness, logic, and, above all, because we had a genuine love for each other, he gradually converted me to Zionism. It was stimulating to be with your father then, and it still is. His love songs did not fade with time. We continue to complement each other, even now.

*(Wiping away a tear.)*

I was fortunate to have been sent from distant Kharkov to that meeting in Minsk. I was lucky to come to Rubiezewicze, and there to meet the love of my life. And then our first child was born –Yentel. Our joy was indescribable. Then Sarah, Yakov, and after him Merre-Liebe, and finally little Yitzchak. Every one of you was, and will always be, a shining star in our lives. With all of you, our lives were fulfilled. My one wish now is that Yentel could be with us. Who could ask for anything more?

*(Looking to David.)*

Now my beloved has to risk his very life to keep us alive, and he is doing it with every ounce of his strength. Nothing is too difficult for him. Nothing.

*(To Sarah.)*

Sarah, darling, you wanted to know who Sonietshka is. Here she is. You wanted to know about David, too. He is here, beside me, indelibly etched in my heart. Life without him would be meaningless. I would die.

*(There is a long moment of silence before Shoshke's demeanor and tone suddenly change.)*

As you all know only too well we are in a very dangerous situation. Our very lives are in jeopardy. Just imagine: a kilo of salt and a jug of kerosene could induce a peasant to drag a Jew off to be shot by a German – and there are so many of them around us. We must find a way out. Right now the Koydanover are the ones being hunted, but before long we'll be the prey. We must find a way out; we must.

*(To David.)*

What do you think, my beloved? How do we go about it? How can we save ourselves?

DAVID

*(After a moment.)*

That was quite a speech you made, you brought back pleasant memories and made me feel as though I were back in Minsk among the young people listening to you recite. Except that, this time, the lucky young man sitting next to you is me, and your audience is your children, your hecklers of twenty years later! I am still so very much I love with you. You are just as beautiful as you were then, and you are still at the very core of my life. You will always be there, until my last breath. Twenty odd years ago, you fought for a better world. Now we are struggling for our very existence.

*(He sighs.)*

How do we survive? I've been working on an idea. But first, let's ask your audience what we ought to do. Sarah, darling, you're the eldest. Let's hear from you first.

SARAH

If Yentel were with us, she would be the eldest. Since I'm next in line, I guess it's my turn. The only weapons I have are my words. Can I fight the Germans with them? Let me turn the question over to the ones who should answer after – your very own heckler, Jacob. He has some young ideas.

*(Jacob opens his mouth to speak, but Sarah continues.)*

He wants to go into the woods to become a partisan, and do insane things like derailing trains, killing Germans, and so on. I told him that I cannot kill – not even a fly. I have no answers. All I have are many questions... and many words.

SHOSHKE

In a way, Jacob makes sense. There does not seem to be any other way to save ourselves. We are being hunted like animals. There's no protections for our people, no law to defend us. Isn't that plain to see?

BOBIE

This child is crazy. He's out of his mind!

*(To David.)*

You little stinker, what would you do in the woods? How would you fight the Germans?

JACOB

We'll find ways.

SARAH

Time will teach us.

BOBIE

With no roof over your heads? You'd leave the house and everything in it? How would you get food? Suppose you became ill?

JACOB

How do animals stay alive?

SARAH

Don't worry, Bobie—

BOBIE

--We cannot live like animals. We are human beings. Don't ever forget that! I, for one, am not going anywhere. I'll stay right here. They'll have to shoot me where I am, in my own house.

DAVID

We've heard from Bobie, and Jacob and Sarah... It's your turn now, my beloved.

SHOSHKE

A bloody war is raging. Russia, England, and America have joined forces to fight the Nazis. All the occupied territories and their millions of people are against them. They can't fight the whole world. Their collapse is inevitable. Still, the question remains: how do we survive until that happens? If the Germans surround our ghetto the way they did in Koydanov, there will be no escape. Therefore, the only option we have is to leave this place as soon as possible. Interestingly, we've all offered a different idea without realizing we were doing so. Yakov wants to go into the woods to become a partisan. Sarah wishes to write – perhaps in the partisan movement. Father would prefer to work for the peasants. As a seamstress, I could work for them as well. Bobie wants to remain here, at home. Merre-Liebe and Yitzchak could tend the animals.

DAVID

*(Repeating.)*

I hope your idea works. I'm going to work on it.

SHOSHKE

There is one thing I forgot to mention, and it is very important. Each and every one of us must work in a different place, and we must watch out for one another and remain close. With determination and God's help, we shall endure until liberation.

DAVID

*(Pulls the family close.)*

If anything should happen to the house of Gershon, the house of my father, at least one of us must survive. I don't know who that lucky one – or unlucky one – will be. Let us link our souls in prayer and respectfully demand of the Almighty that at least one of us will be spared. And should it be his wish that the house of Gershon be destroyed... we will still continue to pray – for the survival of Sarah's diary. That must live forever.

*(Silence falls over the family once more. They hold each other until Sarah speaks.)*

SARAH

Where do we hide the diary? Perhaps we should try to get in touch with the Priest somehow? Or perhaps we should leave it with your peasants? Take it with us wherever we go, or just conceal it in the house?

BOBIE

*(Strongly.)*

Leave it right here, in the house. You may be sure I'll guard it until they shoot me. What can they do with this book – if you can call it a book. They can't kill it... Now I would like to ask one thing of you before I go to sleep.

*(She rises from her chair.)*

Once a week, preferably on Shabbos, we should all gather so you can visit your old Bobie in this house of Gershon. Then we can share the weeks' experiences.

*(Without waiting for a response, she waves a goodnight to the family and leaves for her bedroom.)*

DAVID

*(Smiling.)*

Well then. We need to think long and hard about this before we make a decision. Right now, it is time for all of us to get some sleep.

*(The lights go down briefly.)*

*(Sarah wearily sits at her desk. The day is different. Suddenly the lights change, and we hear Yitzhak and Merre-Liebe yelling from off stage.)*

MERRE-LIEBE

Fire! Fire!

YITZHAK

The Ghetto is burning!

*(Jacob rushes into the room and Sarah looks up.)*

SARAH

Are you here again? You promised to leave me alone. What kind of stories do you have for me now?

JACOB

The Ghetto is burning!

SARAH

Oh really? Is it, now? You are your crazy ideas. You always find reasons to disturb me.

JACOB

Sarah! Come on! Fire! Fire!

*(He grabs for her arm to pull her from the room and the lights shift. Jacob and Sarah are now outside, far down on the stage, on an area of the stage that hasn't been used yet, watching the "Action." There are others around them, watching as well. Members of the fire brigade are rushing*

back and forth. The lights are a bright orange, suggesting their proximity to the fire.)

SARAH

What do we do first?

JACOB

Let's watch the fire brigade in action. Let's help extinguish the fire!

SARAH

And just how do you plan to do that, you silly boy?

JACOB

Stop talking to yourself and let's have some fun!

SARAH

Should we rush home for a pail and get in line? They start at Getzel's river. By the time they reach the fire pumps, there's only a little water left. We'll only get in their way.

JACOB

Come on, let's go help!

FIREMAN

*(As he walks by, with another fire worker.)*

If the fire cannot be contained, not only the ghetto, but the entire village will burn to the ground.

SARAH

*(Realizing the danger.)*

We are too close to the fire; the heat is intense. Don't you feel it? Let's get out of here.

*(Grabbing Jacob.)*

JACOB

*(Wrenching out of her grasp.)*

You're breaking my wrist, you idiot!

SARAH

And you're going to burn alive, stupid! If you stay here any longer, it will be the end of you. We've got to get home and help with the packing. Mother is alone. The younger two won't be much help. Please, let's go!

*(They return home. The lights are still tinged with oranges and red, but*

*not as strongly as they just were. Mother is packing, slowly and methodically, but grinning about something.)*

SHOSHKE

Where have you two been?

SARAH

It's so nice to see you smiling, mom! When you smile, we can't help smiling. What is it that you're so terribly pleased about? Mama, your son is terrible. I literally had to drag him away from the fire.

SHOSHKE

How wonderful it would be if it continued to burn. While the Germans are busy trying to extinguish the flames, they are too busy to beat the Jews. Our people's enemies must see fire brighten the skies. They must gag on the smoke and experience their own destruction. The brutes! Let it burn, Oh G-d, let it burn! Let's all get out. Bobie, you too. The fire is raging, but it's under control. In time it will be extinguished. However our situation will not change.

JACOB

So what should we do, Mama?

SARAH

Please tell us. You've always been a fighter for Justice. Where do we go now?

JACOB

And what do we do?

SHOSHKE

I'm sure there is no other way but to fight. We must leave the ghetto as soon as possible.

*End of Act*

## ACT II

### NARRATOR

We did not leave the ghetto that night, and the fire was extinguished with the loss of three homes. After that, the days in the ghetto came and passed without event. The days were dark and short. There was no electricity, so Sarah had to make do with firelight to write in her diary. It was my job to cut pieces of wood into kindling. One evening, I sat whittling my wood while Sarah wrote. The silence was reassuring. That night, Sarah let me read her diary. I read the words carefully, hard as I tried I could not understand what the words were trying to say, still, just holding the diary, and knowing that my big sister had trusted me with it, gave me a warm glow. Winter's ice melted into cold spring days, and March finally came. Not a day passed without its share of atrocities. One day three hundred young men were seized for work in some town. The police came for my father. Since he was not at home, they took me instead. I was pushed out of the door, followed by Mother and Sarah. I lined up with a group of older, stronger, and taller people. Mother continued to plead for my release, while Sarah held on to me, babbling non-stop. "Nothing will happen to you. This will pass; you'll see. The Germans will be destroyed and nothing will happen to you; I just know it," she kept repeating. Out of nowhere, my grandmother appeared. Without much ado, she grabbed my hand and pulled me out of the line. Fiercely, she whispered, "They did not call Yankel's name, so he can get out. But he had better run fast. Yankel, Sarah and I will be right behind you." My aunt Rochel was also there to help with my rescue. Although Bobie often looked angry, I'd never seen her cry before. Now, as I watched, a few tears trickled down her wrinkled face.

Sarah begged father not to go away again. More and more of our people were being deported, the ghetto was gradually being liquidated. Sarah became very restless, her mind occupied with thoughts of how to save ourselves and where to hide the diary. By the time April came, it was obvious that drastic measures would have to be taken.

*(The lights come up on the house. Inside, Bobie and Shoshke are packing at a furious pace, throwing things into anything that can be used to carry. Iron pails, the few suitcases the family has, sewing bags, etc. Sarah, Jacob, and David are returning from the neighboring village when they stumble upon the scene. Shoshke stops and stares at her husband.)*

### DAVID

Shoshke, What is this?

### SHOSHKE

An officer came by the house today while you were out.... They were making the rounds in the village. He said the ghetto was being emptied. Oh David, we have a day to pack our belongings together. How are going to do this? They said we can only take what we can carry; every adult must be ready to leave. They're leaving the sick and elderly here. They said children would have their own transportation.... They're separating us from our babies, David....

*(She clutches at Merre-Liebe and Yitzchak, who are already at her side, crying.)*

### SARAH

We can hide here!

SHOSHKE

*(Shaking her head.)*

They said anyone found hiding at home would be shot, and I believe them. They're sending us to Dworetz...

*(She starts moving about restlessly, nervously, babbling as she packs.)*

*(The entire house is a scene of confusion until Sarah stops in the middle of the chaos, observing, and thinking. As Jacob runs by, she grabs his arm and snaps into action.)*

SARAH

Now you listen to me. If you behave like a smarty pants we'll all be in trouble. The first thing we have to do is to prepare the knapsacks. Go down to the cellar and bring up those potato sacks, and some potatoes – and if there's some rope lying around, bring that along, too. Don't ask any questions right now. Just start moving.

*(Jacob nods wordlessly, and Sarah goes to work, tearing down curtains, grabbing sheets, and reorganizing the packs her mother and grandmother have packed as Jacob disappears and reappears with sacks of potatoes and some rope from the cellar.)*

SARAH

*(Continuing her commands.)*

Grab those sheets, and cut them in strips. Here are the scissors.

*(Jacob begins to cut, but Sarah interrupts; he is not doing a satisfactory job.)*

Give it to me, quickly. Let's rip it. Where are the potatoes?

JACOB

Are you going to cook them?

SARAH

No, silly. Just do as I've told you.

JACOB

*(Sarcastically.)*

Yes, Captain.

SARAH

*(Grabbing two potatoes.)*

Place one in each corner of the sack, tie the corners with the sheet strips, and one knapsack is ready. We'll need three more.

*(The two work quickly, and soon all six sacks are made. Shoshke starts*



*to admonish them, but Sarah placates her with an "it had to be done.")*

SARAH

Now go outside, Yakov, and find out exactly what's happening, and where Dworetz is located.

JACOB

But we just walked back from the village! I'm too tired to read the map; I have a headache... I want to eat what Danthicka gave us...

SARAH

*(Imitating an army officer.)*

You'd better start moving, NOW.

JACOB

I'm going... I'm going... You know, Sarah, if we joined the Partisans, you would become an officer immediately and you'd lead us all into battle. We'd fight those Germans; we'd derail their trains, and burn their trucks. —

SARAH

*(Smiling.)*

How's that headache?

*(Without waiting for an answer.)*

Let's finish those preparations

JACOB

*(After a moment's consideration. Not intended to frighten Sarah.)*

They'll do to us what they did to the Koydanovers.

SARAH

*(Blanching, almost a threat.)*

You'd better stop talking like that.

SHOSHKE

Are you two starting again?

DAVID

Leave them alone, Let them talk... even scream. It's the tension.

*(There is a silence as the tension that David is talking about becomes palpable. Even the children stop their crying. Sarah interrupts.)*

SARAH

Everything went smoothly until he started talking.

*(To Jacob.)*

Now listen, you know it all. You promised to do everything I asked and you wanted to be my soldier. What kind of a soldier would you be? Ha! Any military man who defies an order from an officer is taken out and shot. You just think about it: I'm your superior now.

JACOB

*(Sardonically.)*

I don't want you to shoot me. So of course, I will obey.

SARAH

Good. Now, here are the clothes we'll wear. We girls will wear one dress on top of another. You put on pairs of pants, one top of the other, and so on. We'll carry these knapsacks on our backs, as well as the food. Each of us will have a separate bag. How does it look to you, Soldier?

*(Jacob silently hugs Sarah, and she clutches him close to her. The family comes close, not knowing what to say, or what to do at this point. After a silent moment, Shoshke speaks.)*

SHOSHKE

If they wanted to kill us, they would have done so the way they did in Koydanov. Why should they drag us 80 kilometers? Obviously they need us over there; and if that's the case, why should they kill us?

*(She looks about, gauging the reactions.)*

Doesn't that make sense?

DAVID

Going into the villages today would place us in danger. The peasants – and even the farmers we worked for – weren't completely on our side, especially after the warnings they received from the German authorities. The walls are plastered with their warnings and threats.

JACOB

I still have a headache... I have to lie down.

SHOSHKE

What's wrong with him?

BOBIE

*(Touching his forehead.)*

Let me see.

DAVID

I'll tell you what's wrong with him. He drank too much vodka today.

## JACOB

*(Smiling, drawing Merre-Liebe and Yitzhak close to him.)*

I'll tell you the whole story.

*(The lights fade on the family sharing a last peaceful moment in their home. As the lights transition, we again see the Narrator Jacob)*

## NARRATOR

Early the next morning, I was awakened by our next-door neighbors. The family had five daughters. One, about my age, was named Fania. She was a slim girl with a rather high-pitched voice. When Fania argued with her sisters, she could wake up the entire Shtetl. It was her voice that roused me from my dreams.

There was yet another trauma to live through before we left the ghetto. On that morning, April 2, we heard shouting. It grew louder and more intense, and was followed by screaming. We became increasingly frightened. My father went outside to see what was going on, and we trailed along behind him. It did not take him long to grasp the danger we were in. We rushed back into the house. S.S. Troops, accompanied by Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and local bandits, had stormed our town before. This time; however, their shooting spree began early in the morning. We thought perhaps a fight had broken out between the Partisans and the local police. My father went outdoors once more to find out what was happening. I went along behind him. The word spread like wildfire: this time they wanted gold. The Jewish police were beaten and humiliated. Helpless to help their fellow Jews, they rushed from house to house explaining the situation.

*(The lights rise on the family once again, this time in a state of panic, preparing the gold.)*

## DAVID

*(To his wife.)*

We must have the gold ready for them. As soon as they enter the house, I'll give them what we have.

*(Grabbing Shoshke's hand.)*

Twenty five years ago I put this ring on your finger and said, "With this ring, you are hereby sanctified unto me." That was the most precious moment of my life. Those bandits in black may rob us of whatever they can; it looks like no one is going to stop them. But they cannot touch my love for you. I'm taking this ring off your finger now, but I say again, "You are sanctified unto me." I reaffirm my love and devotion and respect for you.

*(Shoshke is unable to speak.)*

## BOBIE

*(Grabbing one of Jacob's hands and one of Sarah's.)*

Let's spread our hands. We'll circle around the couple seven times.

*(They do, and Bobie and Sarah sing a traditional wedding song. Jacob and the Children watch them silently. As they finish, there is a cough from the doorway, and two Jewish policemen, badly beaten enter. They remove their hats and armbands and put their yarmulkes on their heads.)*

POLICEMAN 1

We heard. We witnessed the remarriage of this couple. Now, I'm sorry. Please.

*(He extends his hand for the gold and David obliges. The second policeman turns to Rivke-Henia.)*

POLICEMAN 2

I'm sorry, Rivke-Henia.... They want more gold.

BOBIE

I have a little ring that Gershon gave me years ago, and I have a golden watch on a golden chain. There's a picture of Gershon and me... see? There I am, wearing the watch.

*(Pointing to a photograph in a frame.)*

POLICEMAN 2

Yes, I know you have a gold watch on a chain. That's why we came.

POLICEMAN 1

They'll kill us if we don't bring all the gold in the ghetto.

BOBIE

I have a few gold coins I can give you. The watch isn't worth anything; it no longer runs. What good is a watch that no longer runs?

POLICEMAN 2

I'll take your coins. As for the watch, I'll tell them it's useless. And the chain may be of no use without a watch. I give you my word; if they won't take the watch, I'll personally return it to you.

BOBIE

*(Reluctantly handing over the watch, hands shaking as she grasps the chain for the last time.)*

Thieves, Robbers, when will it end? Let there be an end to it....

*(Once more the lights fade and reappear on Narrator Jacob.)*

NARRATOR

On May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1942 our ghetto was liquidated and moved eastward. The elderly and sick were left behind. Later in the month they were taken to Shimkintzer Forest and murdered. My Bobie was among them.

*(Pause. The light start to rise again, just outside of the house. As Jacob narrates, we see the family joining together.)*

The day we were to leave the Shtetl, I tried to take my mind off our awful situation, but I couldn't. The noise in the street became increasingly louder. Yitzchak rested his head on my body, while Merre-Liebe held my hand. A sober faced Sarah and Mother and Father stood around us, as though trying to protect us. Bobie was quietly walking around, on her guard, lest any harm befall her beloved family. It felt satisfying and restful to be surrounded by family – but the feeling was short lived.

It was still early in the morning, but mother busied herself with the meal. The kitchen table looked strange with the Sabbath tablecloth, and with candlesticks that had no candles in them. Mother straightened her amber hair, and smiled. When she smiled, her dimples made her even prettier. Father took his seat at the head of the table. Mother and Bobie sat on either side of him. Then the four of us children filled in the table.

BOBIE

Sarah, darling. I promise to watch over your diary. I assure you that there is no reason to worry. If I ever feel that I can't guard it any longer, I will bring it to Dantchka. I know where to find her.

JACOB

That's enough talking. Let's start eating.

*(They do, in silence. When they have finished, Sarah rises.)*

SARAH

Let's see to these knapsacks. Let's walk around with them and see what happens.

MERRE-LIEBE

How about you, Bobie? Where is your knapsack? Aren't you going with us?

*(To Jacob.)*

Why isn't Bobie going with us?

BOBIE

I'm going to watch the house and pray for your safety. In due time, I'll come visit you.

*(The two youngest smile and each other and jump around, repeating "Bobie will come visit us!")*

SHOSHKE

I won't be able to carry this thing. How in the world will I be able to walk such a long distance? No, I'll stay right here with Bobie.

*(David says a few quiet words to his wife, as the rest of the family watches, unsure of what to do.)*

*(Wiping at her eyes.)*

This is what I want to say: We are going to leave this house shortly – the home in which your father was

born and raised and where you, too, came into this world. I don't know how soon we'll return, but I am sure that we'll have to turn to God in our prayers.

SARAH

I'm so proud of you, Mother. With all the chaos and fear that surrounds us, with all the confusion in this uncertain time, you brought Shabbos into our home...

DAVID

If I am ever forced to part from you, I'll ask our merciful God to release me from my torture and take me into his Kingdom, where I'll plead with Him for your safety.

MERRE-LIEBE

Don't worry, Mama, we'll help you.

YITZCHAK

*(Struggling with the large pack.)*

You see, Mama, it's easy.

SARAH

Don't worry about a thing. We'll manage.

*(Again in charge.)*

Jacob, will you try on your knapsack? Wait – first put on two or three pairs of pants and a few shirts to see what happens. As for me, I have to put some of my dresses on, one on top of another.

*(She reaches for a knapsack.)*

I'll take this one. Mama, here's a small bag with two handles. This is the most valuable one. IT contains our best clothes. We must hold onto it at all costs, in the event that we have to sell the clothes for food. Let's try the knapsacks on again.

*(Adjusting straps.)*

Not bad, huh? Now let's step outside and see what's happening. Mama, there's still time. We'll rush over to Aunt Sorke and Aunt Rochel, to say goodbye.

SHOSHKE

*(To David.)*

What you said... about if we become separated... What can my life be like, when my soul is taken from me?

*(She holds herself close to her husband.)*

*(Sarah sees this, and ushers her brother outside. Once there, she turns to him.)*

SARAH

In the Torah, it is written that God will curse His people. He will punish us for our sins, and we shall suffer hail and brimstone. It is also written that one from each city and two from each family will survive. Our wise men have taught that we are not to question God's ways. But all we ask is that He keep His word – that, if not two, then at least one from our family survive. You, my Yakov, will be that

one. You have wits about you to survive. Promise me that you will find my diary.

JACOB

*(Confused and Frightened.)*

Sarah – I –

SARAH

Promise me!

JACOB

I... I do.

*(Sarah smiles sadly, and hugs her brother close. For the final time, the lights grow dim on the family and we hear from the Narrator Jacob.)*

NARRATOR

My sister, it seems was right. My dear Merre-Liebe and Yitzchak were taken from us shortly after we left the Shtetl. At Iveniets they were stolen from our arms, and at Iveniets they were callously murdered with 650 other children. My mother barely recovered from that loss. She became like a ghost and the further they had us walk, the more ethereal she seemed to become. My father and I were shipped to Mathausen, away from my mother and sister, where I watched with horror as my father, too, withered away. By the grace of God, I survived. I did not know of my sister's fate until I was liberated in 1945 by the Americans at camp Ebensee. I was 18; the same age Sarah was when her diary was cut short. In a displaced person's camp in Linz, Austria someone called my name. I found myself face to face with a man named Binyamin, a former neighbor of ours. His family had lived across the street from mine and my sister and been a close friend of his sister Masha. After much hugging and tears he told me to go to Fernwald, in Germany. My aunt was there, and had Sarah's diary. Of the seven children in my mother's family, Rochel was the only one to survive. By the time I reached them, it was 1946, and my first Passover as a newly liberated man. I arrived at my Aunt Rochel's house just in time for the Seder. It was there that I learned that Sarah has perished in the camps.

It must have been my destiny to survive, because someone close to Sarah had to live if the purpose of continuing the saga – conceived at the tender young age of eleven, and tragically interrupted at eighteen – was to be fulfilled. Once that is accomplished, it will not be difficult for me to leave this world. Then I shall take Sarah's hand and tell her that the wind did not scatter the pages of her story. The diary was well bound. I will tell her about all the helpers God prepared and how Aunt Rochel found her book in the ruins of our Shtetl. Then I'll let her know that her prophecies were fulfilled. The German Pharaoh was crushed, and God is bringing his children home, as Sarah predicted. I experienced the seven stages of hell, and survived. Mother used to beseech the Almighty to keep at least one member of our family alive. God had pushed me through the cracks of the Holocaust and led me to Sarah's diary. That same God has watched over me, on land and on sea, behind barbed wire and beyond it, on the operating table and off it. On May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1942, the day we were forced from our home, he had Sarah leave a page in her diary blank so I could continue. I shall tell Sarah.

I'm not sure what to say about this work. For much of my life I've been interested in the stories of the Holocaust. My original idea for a thesis play was to write about my own family's story of living in Austria in the 30's before emigrating to the United States. I grew up hearing how my grandmother was "on a boat by herself at two" to come and meet her parents who applied for visas before she was born and had to leave her behind with their parents until she, too, could get a visa. Unfortunately, I was too young to ask my great grandfather or my grandmother about what in our family lore was fact and what was fiction before they passed away. I have scores of letters that I plan on getting translated and being able to turn them into a dramatic work of their own, but that was not to come to fruition in time for a thesis project.

My next area of focus was children during the Holocaust. Of course, I had grown up reading the Diary of Anne Frank and in later years came across books containing diaries of other youth of the time. I suppose I felt pulled to diary works because these were outlets that - in most cases - people do not intend others to read and therefore pour their heart and soul onto the pages of these precious books. And children often times have a much clearer, unbiased vision of what and why things are happening. Children have an honest quality about them that allows them to see as - in a perfect world - how things "should" and "shouldn't" be. There is a quality of idealism that sometimes gets lost in the grind of daily life as you age. And, of course, there is the pain of the fact that the innocence is confronted at times with such hatred and violence. My initial intended audience was young adults; I wanted a play that sought to teach the similarities worldwide despite differences of race and religion and used as a learning tool. One that could be taken from school to school or performed at museums. I haven't completely discarded the idea, but have decided that such a play would be more effective if it contained children from several different eras in history, and not JUST the Holocaust. While reading a book containing excerpts of diaries from World War II, I found one diary snippet that kept drawing me back. It was the small excerpt from the diary of a young woman named Sarah Fishkin. I was fortunate to find her younger brother's address in the phone book and wrote to him requesting information on how to locate a copy of the diary - which he was publishing himself.

Mr. Fishkin was the first survivor of the Shoah that I had the pleasure of speaking with. His passion regarding his sister's diary runs very deeply and I was fortunate to be able to sit with him and listen to some of the stories regarding how his father - who was a jack of all trades in the village - and his mother met. He shared the story of how his Aunt Rochel's family survived by hiding behind a false wall when the camp was liquidated and how his Aunt returned to their home to find Sarah's diary. After speaking with Mr. Fishkin, and reading his sister's diary as well as his memoir I knew that I wanted to write a play focusing on this family. A majority of Sarah's diary excerpts in the play are as they were published. I streamlined some of the language, and cut down entries, but I hope that the heart and lifeblood of her words remain. Sarah was a passionate, religious, and intelligent young woman, and I did not want to lose any of that.

It sounds vain or perhaps strange to say so, but I felt something in common with Sarah. I am the oldest of four and while reading Mr. Fishkin's book - and writing the play - I kept seeing the way myself and my siblings interact and trying to figure out what I would do or feel if put in such a situation. While my diaries growing up contained nothing as earth shattering as what Sarah was going through, I kept thinking back to my journaling around September 11<sup>th</sup>, and the way I hoarded information, recording everything I could. Like Sarah, I'm not a fighter. I have words. I felt close to her: similar.

Submitting this play as a thesis is nowhere near the end of the journey this work has undergone. I am organizing a group of people to work on a staged reading of this and eventual workshops. The language will change. I feel confident that scenes will be changed, added, or removed as we work hands on to find what translates best to the stage and what best shows that the families who lived through the



holocaust were just like any number of families today. There is a song by musician Jamey Johnson that goes, “a picture’s worth a thousand words, but you can’t see what those shades of grey keep covered; you should have seen it in color.” With this play, I want to show that the glossy finish on old black photographs is not the reality of the Holocaust. The families and people who endured the hardships were normal people. Not myths or stories in history books. There were good times as well as bad. Joy and tears, even in such a trying time. My hope is that *The Diary of Sarah Fishkin* will make the stories of the Holocaust pertinent and human, especially as we lose so many of the survivors.

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